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ABSTRACT

A developmental English program for a liberal arts college should be individualized and intellectually challenging to students entering a four-year baccalaureate program. Such a program must emphasize motivation, flexibility, and a well-conceived progression for acquiring skills. It should view writing as a holistic process and should use such techniques as group methods, individual teacher-student sessions, peer tutoring, or the "talk-write" method. An introduction to the library and to the use of library skills should be included in a developmental course. Criteria for selecting topics should include grouping assignments around a common theme and assigning topics that are in the student's previous range of experience, are worthy of college-level writing, are concrete and limited in scope, and are related to regular academic disciplines. A developmental writing course should also encourage students to view writing as a reflection of critical thinking. (TJ)

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A Developmental Writing Course for the Liberal Arts Student

Jeffrey J. Folks

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A Developmental Writing Course for the Liberal Arts Student

Jeffrey J. Folks

As Mina P. Shaunessy has shown in her bibliographical essay "Basic Writing," much disagreement exists as to what constitutes "basic" or developmental English. The term "developmental writing" may justifiably be employed at various levels from basic literacy instruction in the community or technical college all the way to refresher composition courses at the most selective private colleges. Shaughnessy writes: "even where programs and teachers use the word 'remedial,' we cannot be at all certain that they mean the same thing by it. One school's remedial student may be another's regular or even advanced freshman."[1] As a direct result of the extensive differences that exist among developmental programs at different institutions, a multiplicity of approaches to basic English instruction have been developed. As the theoretical discussions of developmental learning multiply, and as learning materials and textbooks in basic writing appear in ever greater numbers, it becomes more crucial for the directors and instructors in developmental writing programs to evaluate the competency level of students and adjust classroom practices to suit their needs. Thus, one of my concerns in directing a developmental English program for a liberal arts college has been to provide instruction which is individualized, starting at the student's own level of achievement, but which is also intellectually challenging to students who are entering a four-year baccalaureate program. For students placing in the lower quartile on a locally-designed

grammar and essay test, entry into a traditionally selective liberal arts college requires a strong committment to acquiring certain well-defined academic skills and attitudes. A major emphasis in such a program must be toward motivation toward the difficult task of acquiring these skills and attitudes. In a liberal arts setting the developmental studies instructor must be flexible enough to meet the needs of entering freshmen with wide-ranging preparation, but, of equal importance, the instructor must communicate to students a clearly stated and well conceived progression for acquiring those skills and attitudes which lead to success in the baccalaureate program. While focusing on basic writing skills at the sentence and paragraph levels, the instructor must project to these students a sense of the importance of their writing as a reflection of critical thinking.[2] Once developmental students are assured that their instructor is genuinely concerned with what they think, the task of teaching the minutiae of grammar, mechanics, spelling, and punctuation and the further task of mastering correctness and fluency in sentence structure and style becomes less difficult.

Much of the recent theoretical discussion of basic writing suggests the same conclusion: developmental students are similar to other freshman writers in that they must see writing as a holistic process involving their own thinking before they will make the substantial effort required to improve in specific skills.[3] Several promising methods of teaching basic writing to liberal arts students share as their starting point the need to gain the student's respect for writing as a

reflection of the thought process. For instance, the group methods described by Kenneth A. Brufee in "The Way Out: A Critical Survey of Innovations in College Teaching," project writing as a holistic process worthy of group inquiry. Likewise, the success of one-to-one individualizing between teacher and student may be attributed in part to the fact that such relationships allow the student to percieve an instructor as a whole person, thoughtfully dealing with serious topics--rather than, as is too ofter the case, a fragmented lesson plan consumed by exercise work or blackboard-oriented lecture. Peer tutoring has the same advantage in that students perceive one another in the roles of rational individuals dealing with problems worthy of their interest. Finally, the "talk-write method" of teaching writing described by such researchers as John Hawkes and Thomas J. Farrell attempts to systematize a writing program based on a holistic approach.[5]

In addition to these recent methods, several traditional approaches remain valid. Lectures on the writing process, breaking that process down into topic selection, idea development, outlining, firstdraft revision, and proofreading, can be useful at the beginning of the developmental course, when applied to student writing-in-progress. In the liberal arts college, an early introduction to the resources of the library should also form at least one assignment in the developmental English course. More than a formal "canned" library tour, this assignment should challenge students to use the card catalogue,

periodical room, reference room, and major indexes to support their convictions, perhaps in connection with an argumentative paper. Since this will probably be the first directed use of the library for most developmental students, the instructor should be available in the library and may also wish to enlist the support of the library staff by briefing them in advance with class rosters and topics for reports. In addition to introducing students to the library, this assignment is an introduction to the basic academic skill of locating, assessing, and incorporating authoritative facts and opinions into one's own presentation. While certainly not a full-fledged research paper in any sense, a short paper based on library research is a valuable experience for developmental students.

Just as methods and approaches must be selected carefully to suit the level of student needs, the careful selection of topics for assignments can be a crucial decision. Several criteria should be born in mind when selection topics for written assignments:

(1) Grouping of assignments around a common theme adds coherence to the course and motivates students to explore topics in greater depth on successive assignments.

(2) Topics should fall within the student's previous range of experience, so that the focus of the class is on writing, not on investigation of an unrelated content area.

(3) Topics for papers must gain the student's respect as ideas worthy of college-level writing.

(4) Topics should be relatively concrete and limited in scope.

(5) Topics should be related in some way to regular academic disciplines which the liberal arts student will later encounter (preferably other than or, at least, in addition to literature).

Careful selection of written assignments to meet the above criteria will contribute to a successful developmental writing course for liberal arts students. The specific subject matter for the writing course is less important than the requirement that it be tailored to the student's past experience and present needs. A presidential election year, for instance, offers an opportunity to structure a developmental course around a topic of immediate, concrete interest. The plethora of election materials, including newspaper and media advertising, pamphlets, and coverage in print and media, provide a mass of primary sources from which student writing may be generated. Since information regarding the elections is readily available and can be assimilated easily by students, the focus of the course can be on student writing. Students do not question the "significance" of written assignments dealing with the presidential elections, and the writing exercises they complete for such a course can be applied to regularly required courses in several disciplines.

Another successful developmental writing syllabus deals with the role of money in modern society. Today's career-oriented students are particularly mindful of the importance of material success, and a writing course structured around the role of money gives them a chance to examine their own career goals and to relate an understanding of themselves to the larger society which they are entering. One very successful ten-week course included ten short papers in the following sequence:

1) If I had a million. . .
2) One thing money can't buy
3) The wealthiest man/woman in the world
4) The poorest family I've known
5) Things money can buy
6) Where does money come from?
7) One good way to get rich
8) The Great Depression
9) Boom Town
10) Careers and money

In a developmental class which consisted of a diverse group of students from various geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, these topics motivated the class toward substantial improvement in writing short themes. The active discussion emerging among students from different backgrounds centered on such issues as 1) the role of wealth in determining social environment (several impressively concrete themes dealt with poverty among rural family life in Appalachia), 2) the relative value of money (a student from New York found it necessary to explain to others

from rural Tennessee why he considered $10,000 per year a "poverty-level" income), 3) the relation of money to happiness, and 4) individual goals in relation to careers and money. Class discussion was directed toward the particular paper assignment at hand and usually reflected some form of "research," whether reading in the library, interview, or personal observation (themes #3,6,8,9, and 10 provided occasions for library research; #4,7,8,9, and 10 offered opportunities for conducting interviews; #1,2,4,5, and 7 relied primarily on direct observation or previous experience). By grouping all themes around the central theme of "money in society," the course encouraged a continuing dialogue which generated increased complexity and maturity in student writing as the course proceeded. Issues raised in the course were of immediate concern to the students, yet they were concrete and limited in scope. Finally, as a course which touched on social, political, historical, economic, and literary issues, "money in society" served as a transition experience for students entering a liberal arts college with weak writing skills. The ten themes written in this course served as an introduction to the type and level of written work regularly required in the liberal arts curriculum.

In conclusion, in order to be effective in a liberal arts setting, a developmental writing course should combine those teaching methods which encourage the student to view writing as a reflection of critical thinking with carefully selected topics for writing assignments. Because a multiplicity of theoretical approaches to basic writing do exist at the present time, it is all the more important for teachers of developmental writing to

make deliberate choices regarding curriculum based on their students' abilities and purposes. Since developmental writing in a liberal arts college provides a much-needed transition from secondary training which may have included little if any writing to college courses requiring written themes, reports, and essay exams, the developmental writing instructor should adopt those teaching methods which aid students in developing a flexible, mature, college-level writing style and a course design which provides students with experience in completing assignments appropriate to the liberal arts curriculum.

NOTES

[1]"Basic Writing," Teaching Composition, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 137.

[2]It is well known that studies of the relationship between writing instruction and instruction in traditional grammar "suggest with unusual consistency that traditional grammar has not made a difference," according to Mina Shaughnessy, "Basic Writing," p. 157. Several recent textbooks employ a cognitive approach while minimizing grammatical terminology: see, for example, J. N. Hook, Competence in English: A Fresh Look at the Basics, Second Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977). This text can be used effectively without requiring a great deal of class time, thus allowing the class to focus on writing as a holistic process, while also correcting problems in subskills.

[3]Mina Shaunessy, "Basic Writing," pp. 57-58. See also the 1977 NCTE resolution opposing undue emphasis on teaching of subskills.

[4]College English, 31 (1970), 457-70.

[5]John Hawkes, "An Experiment in Teaching Writing to College Freshmen," Stanford University, 1967; Thomas J. Farrell, "Open Admissions, Orality and Literacy," Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 3 (1974), 247-60.